

Yes, Mommy

A Well-Regulated State

Fred Reed

We tell ourselves that in America we are the Free People. I wonder whether we might not better be called the Obedient People, the Passive People, or the Admonished People. I doubt that any country, anywhere, has been so regulated, controlled, and directed as we are. We are bred to obey. And obey we do.

It begins with the sheer volume of law, rules, and administrative duties. Most of the regulation makes sense in isolation, or can be made plausible. Yet there is so much of it.

Used to be if you wanted a dog, you got a dog. It wasn't really the government's business. Today you need a dog license, a shot card for the dog, a collar and tags, proof that the poor beast has been neutered, and you have to keep it on a leash and walk it only in designated places. It's all so we don't get rabies.

Or consider cars. You have to have a title, insurance, and keep it up to date; tags, country sticker, inspection sticker, emissions test. Depending where you are, you can't have chips in the windshield, and you need a zoned parking permit. You have to wear a seatbelt. And of course there are unending traffic laws. You can get a ticket for virtually anything, usually without knowing that you were doing anything wrong.

Then there's paperwork. If you have a couple of daughters with college funds in the stock market, annually you have to fill out three sets of federal taxes, three sets of state, and file four state and four federal estimated tax forms, per person, for a total of twenty-four. This doesn't include personal property taxes for the country, business licenses, tangible business-assets forms, and so on.

Now, I'm not suggesting that all these laws are bad. Stupid, frequently, but evil, no. Stopping at traffic lights is probably a good idea, and certainly is if *I'm* crossing the street. But the laws never end. Bring a doughnut on the subway, and you get arrested. Don't replace your windows without permission in writing from the condo association. Nothing is too trivial to be regulated. Nothing is not some government's business.

I wonder whether the habit of constant obedience to infinitely numerous rules doesn't inculcate a tendency to obey any rule at all. By having every aspect of one's life regulated in detail, does one not become accustomed to detailed regulation? That is, detailed obedience?

For many it may be hard to remember freer times. Yet they existed. In 1964, when I graduated from high school in rural Virginia, there were speed limits, but nobody much enforced them, or much obeyed them. If you wanted to fish, you needed a pole, not a license. You fished where you wanted, not in designated fishing zones. If you wanted to carry your rifle to the bean field to shoot whistle pigs, you just did it. You didn't need a license and nobody got upset.

To buy a shotgun in the country store, you needed money, not a background check, waiting period, proof of age, certificate of training, and a registration form. If your tail light burned out, then you only had one tail light. If you wanted to park on a back road with your girl friend, the cops, all both of them, didn't care. If you wanted to swim in the creek, you didn't need a Coast Guard approved life jacket.

It *felt* different. You lived in the world as you found it, and behaved because you were supposed to, but you didn't feel as though you were in a white-collar prison. And if anybody had asked us, we would have said that the freedom was worth more to us than any slightly greater protection against rabies, thank you. Which nobody ever got anyway.

Today, the Mommy State never leaves off protecting us from things I'd just as soon not be protected from. We must wear a helmet on a motorcycle: Kevorkian can kill us, but we cannot kill ourselves. Why is it Mommy Government's business whether I wear a helmet? In fact I do wear one, but it should be my decision.

And so it goes from administrative minutiae (emissions inspections) to gooberish Mommy-knows-bestism ("Wea-a-ar your lifejacket, Johnny!") to important moral decisions. Obey in small things, obey in large things.

You must hire the correct proportion of this and that ethnic group, watch your sex balance, prove that you have the proper attitude toward homosexuals. You must let your children be politically indoctrinated in appropriate values, must let your daughter get an abortion without telling you, must accept affirmative action no matter how morally repugnant you find it.

And we do. We are the obedient people.

As the regulation of our behavior becomes more pervasive, so does the mechanism of enforcement grow more nearly omnipresent. In Washington, if you eat on the subway, they really will put you in handcuffs, as they recently did to a girl of twelve. In 1964 in King George County, the cop would have said, "Sally, stop that." Arresting a child for sucking on a sourball would never have entered a state trooper's mind.

Which brings us to an ominous observation. America is absolutely capable of totalitarianism. It won't be the jackbooted variety, but rather a peculiarly mindless, bureaucratic insistence on conformity. What we call political correctness is an American approach to political control.

Our backdoor totalitarianism has the added charm of being crazy.

Think about it. Confiscating nail clippers at security gates, arresting the eating girl on the subway, the confiscation from an aging general of his Congressional Medal of Honor because it had points, the countless ejections from school of little boys for drawing pictures of the Trade Center in flames, playing cowboys and Indians, for pointing a chicken finger and saying "Bang."

This isn't intelligent authoritarianism aimed at purposeful if disagreeable ends. It is the behavior of petty and stupid people, of minor minds over-empowered, ignorant, but angry and charmed to find that they can push others around. It is the exercise of power by people who have no business having any.

And we obey. We are the obedient people.

